

ADAM WHIPPLE  
Writing Portfolio

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This article originally appeared on The Rabbit Room on July 17, 2018.

## Awkward Saint Crazy

by Adam Whipple

Had my wife and I been born a hundred years ago, our lot might have been quite different. Our family has a history of bipolar disorder, you see. Mental illness was looked upon with even greater stigma in days of yore than today. The canon of schoolchild literature hailing from 1850 through the 1970s is littered with characters subject to one stripe of insanity or another. Mr. Rochester's first wife in *Jane Eyre*, Conrad's demigod Kurtz, Boo Radley, Robert Cormier's Adam Farmer in *I Am the Cheese*, Mr. Hyde, and the tragic cast of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* all come to mind. To be fair, this initially only suggests that insanity makes for a useful plot device (which it does), but the way in which all these authors presented their characters is telling. Though some of the authors stared the darkness of mental illness in the eye, the best that can often be said of the characters is that they are anti-heroes. Even Arthur "Boo" Radley, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is presented as a hidden mark of family shame—an accurate depiction of a common situation, if truth be told. Our understanding of mental vagaries during those past eras was marked by fear and loathing.

We've changed our terminology since then, preferring euphemistic jargon to the tactile but oversimplified monikers of older times. We no longer have *lunatics*, for example—those whose minds are affected by the phases of the moon. These days, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual—that worthy tome by which we assess the mind's irregularities and defects—is weighted with terminology enough to cause blunt force trauma. Take this paragraph on Passive-Aggressive Personality Disorder:

*The essential feature is a Personality Disorder (p. 305) in which there is resistance to demands for adequate performance in both occupational and social functioning; the resistance is expressed indirectly rather than directly. The consequence is pervasive and persistent social or occupational ineffectiveness, even when more self-assertive and effective behavior is possible. The name of this disorder is based on the assumption that such individuals are passively expressing covert aggression.*

—DSM III

You could be forgiven for pausing amid such dry prose for a small nap, and possibly to douse the paragraph with water. It's a far cry from *lunacy*, though in our persistent fearmongering about what is pejorative and what is not, we seem to forget that such words as *demented* and *mad* used to be clinical in usage. In one way, I'm thrilled that our explorations of the mind have birthed such extensive literature. It's a testament, at least, to how complex and unfathomable the human mind is. For such a work of art, we can give glory to God.

At the Whipple house, though, our best weapon against fear and misunderstanding is simply talking about it. We don't speak in the languorous gobbledygook of the DSM, helpful though it may be; we use simple words. Sometimes, my wife, who struggles with being bipolar, is even keen to tell me that she's "crazy." At times, we use that word in jest and wonder if we're kidding. Some members of my family have questioned if I'm on the autism spectrum; I often think that perhaps they're right. The other day, I was trying to have a conversation with my wife, and I simply couldn't do it—because I heard *everything*. Her computer keys, the box fan, the kids talking in the back room, the swoosh of the dishwasher, the dog's nails clacking on the floor—it was all too much. Our house isn't particularly loud, but I actually put my hands over my eyes because there was too much information.

"I'm going to just need you to look right at me here in a second," I said. "Otherwise I can't talk."

If this is all somewhat offensive to you, or if it makes you uncomfortable to read it, you should see what it does to polite conversation in person. In dealing with our mental roadblocks, my wife and I are now pretty comfortable mentioning things both to total strangers and to acquaintances who would rather not know. You'd be amazed at the way some folks clam up at the subject of mental illness. People shift in their shoes and look elsewhere. Quick talkers suddenly stutter. Nearby Chatty Cathy dolls burst into flame. No matter how it has made others feel, though, talking about it freely seemed to help us. We've never really been good at political correctness with our problems anyway, though we've certainly grown in our freedom to deal with them and to be human, especially within the church. Of course, it wasn't always that way.

For a number of years, we attended church with several people who had a difficult time with our struggles. To clarify, this congregation was full of loving, wonderful individuals, many of whom I still see and others whom I miss terribly. I also understand the obvious caveat that every church has its problems. While we adored this church, of which we were deeply a part, one of the unspoken rules that seemed to pervade their doctrine was that mental disorders ought to be matters of prayer only, rather than matters of prayer and medical treatment. In our family's dealings with bipolar disorder, we grew walls around ourselves in odd places. While in certain arenas of our lives—sin, finance, servanthood—we attempted to maintain transparency, we were also quick to protect ourselves when we sensed a billowing tiff about psychological things.

It was strange; there were those in that small body of believers who faced mental illness on a daily basis in school system jobs or social services. They had a wealth of experience dealing with psychoactive medicines, at least by extension. Yet, like the janitor whose own house is a wreck, or like the banker whose credit is in shambles, they seemed to have a blind spot. It was insinuated to us—and occasionally we were told outright—that we should get over it. On its face, this isn't strictly a bad idea. No medication or corrective action is perfect in mental health. A certain amount of *getting over it* is part and parcel, but to me, this advice felt like a fear-based response, a question hanging in the air about God's ability to heal people. I was angry at times, but who was I to judge? I had spent years of my own blowing off psychology, and anyway, the Church is a family. If we open ourselves to know and be known, we're going to get hurt. In a broken world, love will always know pain.

I don't say this to denounce anyone. Through being a part of that church and others, and moreover, by the work of the Spirit, we've grown to be able to share our experiences, even when people disagree. This, I think, is essential to the work of the Church, especially as the internet and other media enable us to surround ourselves with a veritable Greek chorus of yes-men, always affirming our quirks or opinions. In the echo chamber of social discourse—which is rarely *discourse* these days—we don't truly get to hear that most essential voice: the naysayer. As much as I chafed at being gainsaid by brothers or sisters (in a variety of subjects), I've been glad to meet real people who will tell me that I'm wrong, because I am. Every day. In thought, word, and deed. *Mea maxima culpa*.

When we're up front about our difficulties, about our failures and hangups, it is Christ who gets the glory. There are so many buried struggles, so many skeletons hung to dry in family closets. Some of them are immoralities of our own making; some are just problems we inherited, ripples of the Fall charged with the potential energy of redemption. I know that I personally cannot pretend I was born *tabula rasa*, fresh as a new box of Arm & Hammer. I came with history, and I made more along the way. I've talked about my own struggles with sin to fellow church members and sometimes received the same clammed-up horror as when we discuss bipolar disorder. Other times, thankfully, there is grace and an understanding of God's finished and continuing work.

In some ways, we can honestly be glad this isn't some century past, a century where Joseph Merrick gets chased through the streets and Bertha Mason gets locked in the attic. Nevertheless, we all still try to keep darkneses and difficulties out of sight. Yet if we are to face our demons, we do well to look at them in the light of day. In the Church, of all places, we

should be unafraid of sharing our weaknesses and failures, for it is there that God's workmanship is most obvious.

In any case, you can always have that delightful moment of social discomfort to brighten your day.

*This article originally appeared in Analogue on April 29, 2018.*

## **In Defense of William Shatner**

by Adam Whipple

William Shatner's album *Has Been* came out on Shout! Factory in 2004, and I've never had the heart to get rid of it. At the very least, it begs repeated curiosity over its indefinability. At most, it appeals to my love of poetry. I only knew Shatner from the show *Rescue 911* and as a legend from my dad's love of *Star Trek*. By the time I encountered the man on prime time, Captain Picard already helmed the Enterprise, and Shatner seemed possessed of a permanent sardonicism as he tried to escape the clutches of Captain James T. Kirk.

*Has Been* was his third album. The first had been a smashup of Shakespeare, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and popular tunes of the time, and it seemed to live at the Will Ferrell-like intersection of uncomfortable comedy that looked like extreme sobriety. The second was a live recording of a one-man show, in which he notably returned to the character of Cyrano. Both albums lean out into "space, the final frontier," sporting cosmically themed graphics or tracks. Their existence and bent beg the question of what the man himself was or might have been without his seminal television and film character. How much of Kirk was Shatner, and how much of Shatner couldn't help but be Kirk? Shatner's career after *Star Trek* resembled a glass house around the man's psyche, as he wrestled with the weight of his gravitas through spoofs and interviews and found other outlets for his creativity. *Has Been* charts a point in the actor's life when he seemed comfortable with having that eight-hundred-pound sci-fi gorilla in the room. Aside from a couple classy, vulnerable nods in the direction of his early career, much of the spoken-word music deals with other things.

Shatner gets tongue-in-cheek about the strange animal of his celebrity, opening with the proletarian jab of "Common People" by Pulp and taking on the ghosts of his detractors in the title track, which is a Spaghetti Western anthem.

Let's stop there a moment, because we just crossed into uncharted territory. How can Britpop and a track worthy of Sergio Leone make good bedfellows? The record is produced by Ben Folds, and it feels like a fairly pure collaboration, a John-and-Paul style combo that's hard to recreate. Folds lives at the well-woven center of his many musical threads, reaching into jazz, country, avant-garde, and even minimalism. A Who's Who of musicians brings the vision to life, including Adrian Belew, Fleming and John, Aimee Man, Jon Auer of The Posies, and Brad Paisley. In the final analysis, Folds himself is the cohesive musical element, applying his production style and instrumental chops across multiple genres. The result is somewhat episodic at points, but that works in the record's favor.

By the second track though, we know we're out beyond the tropes of Shatner as a byword among critics. "It Hasn't Happened Yet" assesses the normal midlife crisis of living between the shadow of mortality and a curriculum vitae that, in the long history of the world, doesn't amount to much.

*People come up and say hello  
Okay, I can get to the front of the line  
But you have to ignore the looks and yet  
I'm waiting for that feeling of contentment  
That ease at night when you put your head down  
and the rhythms slow to sleep...*

*At my age I need serenity  
I need peace  
It hasn't happened yet*

It makes for good medicine, especially as Shatner seems to give priority to making good art rather than pleasing a nebulous panel of imagined critics.

That's not to say the entire album is emotionally leaden. The comedic shenanigans—which still carry a goodly amount of introspection—begin with the third track, “You’ll Have Time.”

*Live life  
Live life  
Like you're gonna die  
...because you're gonna*

The song has the brilliant dark humor to be a slow-burn gospel piece, replete with a choir backup and Ben Folds playing what certain congregations might call *preachin' chords* on a lo-fi Wurlitzer. It's brazen and wonderful and builds to the choir reciting multiple means of shuffling off the mortal coil, including “choke on a chicken bone.” “Am I gonna die?” sings a choir member. “You are gonna die,” Shatner reassures her.

The comedy reaches a fever pitch with the tune “I Can't Get Behind That,” in which Shatner and Henry Rollins rant back and forth about things that annoy them (and probably us too), while Matt Chamberlain goes bananas on a drum kit and Adrian Belew makes sound effects and racket on an electric. It's like a scene from *Birdman*, turned up to eleven, especially with the drums. You can almost see the two vocalists in a studio, waving their arms at each other, having a Nicolas-Cage-style breakdown.

There also are moments of incredible intimacy. On “What Have You Done,” Shatner walks us through the heart-scalding moment of arriving home one night to find his third wife, Nerine, drowned in their pool out back. It's an instance in which, like a crucifixion painting, the sheer weight of the backstory becomes in large part the weight of the work. It almost resists critical approach. Shatner couches the poem in the minimalist undercurrent of Sebastian Steinberg's bowed upright bass overtones. The noise is just present enough to lend a dark tension, and knowledge of the context makes listening to the piece difficult.

As a personal journal, the lyricism hits hard, even uncomfortably so. On “Familiar Love,” Shatner and Folds explore the physical and erotic territory of a longstanding relationship. Listening can feel voyeuristic here, but there's also something so wonderfully plain about the poem. Its sensuality lacks the heady desperation and idealization of most Hollywood sexual narrative. It even wanders away from the bed into the curious moments of prismatic normalcy that only occur in lengthy relationships.

*Sliced apples, almond butter and feta cheese  
Let's feed the dogs  
Send out for Chinese  
Watching movies on TV and fall asleep  
Arms wrapped around  
So happy  
We weep*

The people are normal people, a fact reinforced in the follow-up track called “Ideal Woman,” in which Shatner pokes fun at his own lingering sense of entitlement within the relationship.

*It's you I fell in love with  
Your turn of phrase  
Your sensitivity  
Your irrational moods  
Well, maybe that could go*

*But everything else  
I want you to be you*

Most people probably don't go in for William Shatner as a musical poet, it's true, but this album deserves a broad audience and critical attention as a serious work. It isn't divorced from the theatrical tonnage of Shatner's characteristic delivery and performance history, and that's on purpose. Instead, the record plays into his charisma and couples it with a fierce humanity that might just awaken your empathy as a listener, even while it lets you know that William Shatner has some empathy for you.

*This article originally appeared in Curator Magazine on March 7, 2014.*

## **Liturgy in Blue**

by Adam Whipple

Autumn weekdays at Sinclair's Eve bring early rising and long commutes. We wish it was less harried, but the presence of children stretches the simplest daily ablutions into inefficient adventures. We brush teeth and tie shoes in a panicked half-jig. We go through breakfast motions. I drive my girls across town to Oak Ridge, to some friends of the family who keep them while my wife and I work. Through the mild suburban sprawl we go, past the park, off the paved road, and into a short stretch of creek-carved wilderness walled by high, tree-thick hills on either side with the whisper of water at the base. I always turn off the music, no matter what we're listening to, and we crawl the dreamy wynd with the windows down, taking in the intricacies of every sound. It was in this place, in the middle of our normal scrabble for time, that I first saw the indigo bunting.

It perched halfway up a spear of ironweed, looking from my distance like a survey ribbon knotted along the road by some passing crew. Then, as we got nearer, recognition dawned on me that the ribbon was alive—miraculously blue, a heart-beat like a jackhammer, and *alive*. It was a locus of the affronting holiness one usually associates with supernovae and the aurora borealis, riding the very verge of possibility in its beauty. As if waiting for epiphany to fire like a nerve impulse, the little bird took wing and was gone, a blur of cerulean against the pale, daybroken sky. I was speechless for a moment as we came to a pair of does that regarded us with their inscrutable expressions. I rolled the back windows further down, making sure my daughters could see the deer, and we drove on to the house different people than we had been moments before. The curtain at the world's edge had rustled. I felt dazzled out of slumber.

Indigo buntings are not actually blue. Like polar bears, they are creatures of refraction. Their scintillating color is a result of sunlight diffusing at angles through the grillwork of barbules and hooklets that make up their feathers. Backlit, or under certain conditions, their feathers are a standard secretary black. Yet we are mesmerized by them, because we are mesmerized by light. I had waited for years to see an indigo bunting in the way I've waited to hear firsthand the freight-train growl of a tornado. Once you experience it, no amount of forgetfulness can tear it from you. Curiously, I found it—or was I found?—on a road I had taken hundreds of times. Tuskegee Drive yields a fair number of glimpses into the microcosmic tapestry of Appalachian flora and fauna. Owls and herons cruise the pass. Whitetails pick their way through the undergrowth, banqueting in the brambles under vows of silence. Sycamores clap their hands, and the gravel track is bordered by Queen Anne's Lace, Black-eyed Susans, bee balm, and wild flowering peas. I'm in awe of all of these, and I relish the mornings when the fog has yet to lift and the lowland woods unfurl in fern-brake green. Every drive brings a new miracle, and repetition is the key. Great mysteries are learned by rote. Bury yourself in the routine, and have the grace to pay attention. Prepare to be surprised.

I wrote my way through the Psalms a few years ago, like a medieval monk. Before the advent of movable type, the Scriptures were copied by hand by these silent, celibate people who slowly went blind by candlelight. I don't presume to say that many of them had a greater handle on the Gospel than do modern preachers and theologians, but I'm hard-pressed to find a better way to learn these things than to immerse myself in them.

*"There is a law written in the darkest of the Books of Life, and it is this: If you look at a thing nine hundred and ninety-nine times, you are perfectly safe; if you look at it the thousandth time, you are in frightful danger of seeing it for the first time."*

—G. K. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* <sup>1</sup>



The more liturgical churches have that much figured out, at least. The Anglicans and Lutherans stage their elaborate pageantries, with the lines and the blocking well-rehearsed. They realize that, being human, we have not yet given anything, even God, our undivided attention. So we submit to liturgy. Eventually, in our most subconscious thoughts, we get walloped by the meaning of it at some unexpected moment in the grocery line, or when the Lord flings a feathered sapphire onto the back roads.

Still, this mortal coil allows me no control over the scheduling of epiphanies. As Chesterton said, it may be the thousandth time down the lane, but the dues of the previous nine hundred ninety-nine must be paid. I have no say in when the heavens open and bright rays of revelation shine forth, but I must show up. If I don't show up, there's no chance. Not only this, but it helps to show up at the appropriate place. One will find few indigo buntings bobbing about the deeps of a subway tunnel or a dripping back alley. It helps when you make a point to go looking for the impressionist paint-splatter of the Divine brush.

This cagey, wry sense of joy is one of the most wonderful things about the Psalms. They hide blue birds between their lines, and they never give themselves away in the first reading. Then, with a few repetitions, they become more human, more real. At times, some of them approach the ravings of a lunatic. David begs for barbaric infanticides and revels in self-assured righteousness. The old Hebrew songbook rings with banality, blackness, and all the dark trails one can travel. And then, after a while, with no warning or fanfare, a bunting jumps out of the words, flying and singing like the "man after [God's] own heart" (Acts 13:22). A thousand readings beyond that, when control is finally ceded or lost, a glimpse of Christ himself takes flight from the pages, streaking like a smudge of uncapturable color across the landscape, leaving holy upheaval in its wake.

I've seen only one other indigo bunting since that day, in a tree above a field of sunflowers outside downtown. I was jogging, sweaty and exhausted, and once again on a familiar road. Like before, it took me by surprise. As I have jogged and driven many familiar roads since then, I keep reading the Psalms. After all, the hinge-pin of liturgy is hope. We remember the flutter of wings. We hope to stare through black letters and see only blue light.

<sup>1</sup> Chesterton, G. K. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*. New York: Dover, 1991. Print.

This article originally appeared on CelebrateKnoxville.com on November 21, 2013.

## **Jennifer Daniels, *Come Undone***

Review by Adam Whipple

In three acts, Jennifer Daniels has opened the door on the struggle of faith and marriage.

*Come Undone* is Jennifer's fourth full-length project to date. It works as a de facto concept record, telling her uncensored story with a truthful gaze. Punctuated by two pausal instrumentals, "Selah I" and "Selah II"—named after an ancient Hebrew poetic term—the tale unfolds in movements common to all journeys of the soul. First, there is the initial, awkward delight, where the first lines ring both with foreboding:

*Did you ever lay out on the dock at 4AM  
Thinking how the moon would rise  
Upon the darker depth of the night inside?*

and with the cheery, stuttering wink of desire:

*Your candy apple eyes  
Your jeans over your thighs—Oh my!  
You should love me*

After that, the second movement begins with the heartfelt gloom of "Home Burial," a gorgeous, difficult tragedy carried by the excellent piano skills of singer-songwriter Ruut and woven with the story of faith-shaking miscarriage. Jennifer then brings back both "Rage" and "Spider Noise," two long-standing songs of hers that have grown along with her musicianship, followed by "You Slay Me," a gritted-teeth prayer worthy of Job.

*If I had your power I'd hold back the storm  
That rakes out the light, the strength of mankind  
And if I had your power I'd let children live  
But you are the LORD and you slay me.*

The third movement begins with the quiescent hope of "My Lover's Ghost," the surrender after the pressing crucible,

*So when it comes my day to die  
Let them bury me beneath the birches high  
By the river that sings heaven's lullaby  
By the words he says  
By the tears he cries  
I will rise*

and ends with the blood-stirring gospel choir of "All the Glory."

Jennifer's lyrics draw from the gracious sort of feminism that is joyous over marriage and, to quote Wendell Berry, "pleased to bear a child." It is womanhood at its most fulfilled. Even better, the tone retains all of its beautiful feminine mystery, never once holding up militant hands. Whatever it does for women, it will make men into better men. Living in the superimposition of marriage and faith, her writing uses one as an icon of the other, blending lyrics to a husband with lyrics to God and admitting faults and anger with heart-searing boldness.

There is not an ounce of cynicism in the whole lot—all the pain is real pain. We are bidden to hear the story as a balm, and if the lyrics are the invitation, the music is the house.

Jennifer's records have always played against the gothic backdrop of the American southern highlands, a setting most evoked by her voice. Both the raw power and the honest bends and creaks effect a beckoning humanity; there is beauty in the candor. With such a timbre, she leads you through the writhen woods of her mountain home, basking on sun-warmed rocks or watching your breath crystalize in the brittle cold. One could get lost out here, so we hope. Over the course of all their projects, Jennifer and Jeff have wisely avoided an overabundance of studio vocal tuning, letting the cliffs and defiles of Appalachia stand out instead of burnishing them into perfection.

*Come Undone* is a culmination, both musically and lyrically. Where *Dive & Fly* leaned toward a more visceral idiom and *Summer Filled Sky* made good use of studio polish, *Come Undone* achieves both. Shadowy sounds live on the fringes of the songs, painting the ghostly landscape with maturity and confident grace. Listen, and listen well.

*This article originally appeared on TN Food & Farm on May 3, 2018.*

## **Mo Pitney Keeps Humble Amid the Big Time**

Interview by Adam Whipple

*For many country radio listeners, Mo Pitney is associated with a classic style of the genre. In an age of well-shellacked repetitions of lyrical and musical country rock tropes, it's the older material, and anything resembling it, that stands out. Pitney now lives in Nashville, but he's a native of the Rockford, Illinois, area and grew up loving country and bluegrass as played in small local circles. Lauded by Rolling Stone, Billboard, and Huffington Post, he still keeps his feet firmly planted on the ground. He was kind enough to sit down and answer some of our questions.*

### **AW: Your dad was a part-time musician, right?**

MP: Yeah, he had a little recording studio actually built in our house, and he played steel guitar and banjo. He started when he was young with his family band, The Pitneys. But then, growing up, he was in numerous country and bluegrass bands as much as I can remember. I saw him play often.

### **AW: Did that give you this running sense of being able to make a living playing music?**

MP: No, not making a living. I always wanted to play music, I just always thought it would be on the side. I would play bluegrass festivals and do things here and there. My dad hustled, and I saw him be a car dealer, and he painted cars and did different things. I thought I was going to do what he did and enjoy music as a hobby, and maybe a little side job. But it's taken off.

### **AW: When did that realization hit—that music had become something larger for you?**

MP: Well, even after I moved to Nashville, I didn't really believe in myself as an artist. You know, I could play guitar and sing, but there's a lot taller order for a well-rounded singer-songwriter artist. I came to town, and I did a lot of writing, and I had some people around me believe in what I was doing. But I don't know that I really believed in it until I played the Opry one night, and I remember getting a standing ovation the first night I played. And it feels like, after that moment, some trigger flipped in my head, and I thought, "Maybe this is why God made me fall in love with the guitar." Maybe I'm supposed to take care of my family, and he's going to create a future and a living with me through art. So ever since then, I've put my hand a little harder to the plough.

### **AW: What was it like coming to the Nashville, then? What were the differences between the bluegrass and country culture where you grew up in Illinois and what it was like in the South?**

MP: Well [laughs], there's not really any bluegrass *culture* up in northern Illinois. Where I learned to play, there's a small group of people that hop around to open mic jams. I actually started playing Johnny Cash music, 'cause that was a record I got from my dad. And at one of those open mic jams, I saw somebody playing the banjo, and I fell in love with music. Those jams were a mixture of old time country and bluegrass music.

So I just started to make that circuit. I would drive around with my dad and play all those little jams. That was about as big as country and bluegrass music was—thirty or forty people getting together in different counties up there. So there's not a huge culture, except when you flip over into Top 40 country radio. All my buddies loved country music, but bluegrass was really a small love up there.

Now you move down to Nashville—obviously this is Music City. Everywhere you go, there's multiple world-class players, whether it's country or bluegrass. Being able to move down here kind of slingshot me, because I was just in the right garden, I guess, to grow the talent God had given me.

**AW: You've got your favorite artists in those bluegrass and country areas, but I understand that, like a lot of folks, you enjoy multiple different kinds of music. Who are some people you listen to that might strike fans as unexpected?**

MP: James Taylor and Carole King. James Taylor's been a huge influence on my music. Um, Tony Rice—he's a guitar player. Really he's a bluegrass guitar player that had a lot of jazz influence. There's a lot of singer-songwriters that I listen to: Randy Newman, and some kind of behind-the-scenes guys. Rich Mullins, he's a gospel singer-songwriter, and I've been tremendously inspired by his music. Keith Green is another. Andrew Peterson is a newer artist that really inspires me; he just writes about truth and the human struggle and the ups and downs of life. And then he also writes about the cure.

Though my music doesn't really mirror what he does, I have learned a lot about making music and the things I want to say from Andrew Peterson and the group of people he hangs out with around The Rabbit Room.

**AW: You have this slow-and-steady approach to your music career that flies in the face of the meteoric fame that most people want. Is there something that drives that particular sensibility in you?**

MP: For the longest time—and I still get this way—I'm at times afraid of success. I don't want it to ruin the art or ruin my family. And I know God has kind of planned out as far as he wants to take me; I don't want to get ahead of him. I work hard, you know; I don't only work on the things that are going to drive my career forward. I bust my butt working on the bus, writing music and recording.

But as far as the success part, that's really not up to me. I'm okay with however fast he [God] wants to go. I don't want to strong-arm him or flatter or try to puff up my career to country radio, because I don't really find my security in where my song is on the chart. I've been able to make a living and take care of my family so far at this slow and steady pace, and I'm just going to take it one step at a time. Hopefully the music and the reasons for doing it don't get polluted along the way, and hopefully people still enjoy what we put out.

**AW: People do tend to load you up with this mantle of saving traditional country music. What do you do with that?**

MP: I really gotta be careful. I've thought about this a lot in the last year. From what I've gathered—and I want people to understand this—guys like Merle Haggard had an older generation saying that he wasn't Hank Williams. And there's people that probably closed out Merle Haggard, because he allowed jazz influence to come into his music, and he actually created something new for that era. You can say that for probably most of these staple artists that people love.

So I have to figure out how to build from my foundation of the music that I love and that people label me as. Because I would copy those things, and people loved it, because I did it well since it was music I loved the most. But, as an artist, I have to figure out how to mix every influence and create a sound that kind of stands alone. I want to pay tribute to the old stuff and not lose myself in what I love, but allow my James Taylor influence and Andrew Peterson influence to creep into my music. I still want to be an authentic, honest artist, but experiment a little. I still want people to say, "He's a country singer," but I don't want to put myself in a box of only saving the past. I want to bring the past along to the future, maybe bringing in a younger audience and bridging the gap.

*Mo Pitney will be headlining the Bloomin' BBQ & Bluegrass Festival in Sevierville, Tennessee, at 8pm on May 19th. His album Behind This Guitar, from Curb Records, is available on Spotify, iTunes, Apple Music, and all major digital retailers. More information at [www.mopitney.com](http://www.mopitney.com).*